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PERSONAL EXPLANATION
OF
HON. WILLIAM N. H. SMITH,
OF NORTH CAROLINA,
ON THE
CONTEST FOR THE SPEAKERSHIP.

DELIVERED IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, FEBRUARY 21, 1860.

Mr. SMITH, of North Carolina. I ask the unanimous consent of the House to make a personal explanation.

There was no objection.

I ask the indulgence of the House to enable me, by a brief statement, to correct certain erroneous and unjust impressions which exist in the public mind, and more especially in my own district, growing out of the recent contest for the Speakership, and incidents connected with it. The proposed correction is due to myself and others who, when my name was presented for that office, gave me a ready, warm, and earnest support.

It has been represented, and, where correct and full sources of information are not accessible and the facts not known, believed, that I made or authorized the declaration, not only that I had never been connected with the American organization, and did not concur in any of the proscriptive features of its party creed, but had denounced and repudiated the party and its principles.

That over-strong statements as to my relations with the American party were made in the progress of the exciting ballot of Friday by various gentlemen, who, when about to transfer their votes to me, assigned reasons for the change, I shall not undertake to deny. But, as there was much confusion, and no little difficulty of hearing in the Hall, I did not at that time fully apprehend their extent and import, as they afterwards appeared in the public prints, or a sense of duty would have constrained me to make the correction when they were uttered, without regard to prudential considerations or the suggestions of friends.

When the debate was afterwards published, and I saw the false and injurious position in which, uncorrected, they would place me—of being subjected to suspicion, if not imputation; of seeking an office of such high character through misconceptions which, if not originating with me, would be countenanced by my silence—I determined to occupy no such equivocal position before the House and the country; and, before another ballot could be had, to make a distinct avowal of my party relations upon this floor.

With this purpose I prepared a statement which, with some slight modifications not affecting its substance, I now hold in my hand; and entered this Hall on Monday intending to submit it to the consideration of the House, unless relieved of the embarrassments in which the former proceedings had here had left me. I will read it:

“My attention has been directed to the remarks of honorable gentlemen—members of this House—as reported in the public papers, and made during the progress of the ballot for Speaker on Friday last, which require, at the earliest moment, explanation at my hands. The remarks to which I refer are predicated mainly upon a brief, hurried, and interrupted conversation that took place at my seat just before, between the honorable member from Ohio (Mr. PENDLETON) and myself.

“The statement made on the floor by the honorable member himself, while not professing to give the details of what passed, is substantially correct as to its results, inasmuch as I made known to him the grounds I had taken in my canvass in 1857; and there was nothing whatever proscriptive in them. It is true that, when interrogated, I said to him that I had never been a member of the American organization; but had been, and still was, a Whig, and as such had been elected upon broad, conservative, national grounds. But I did not say, nor mean to be understood as saying, that I had denounced the American party, or repudiated its principles. So far as its views were proscriptive, they did not meet my approval.

“Among those who have been in connection with that organization, I recognize true and patriotic men, to whose hearty and earnest coöperation with other friends I owe the honor of having a seat upon this floor. I said to my friend, I could not be placed in antagonism to these gentlemen.

“This explanation would have been made at the time, had the full import of the remarks, as afterwards published, been then properly understood. The misapprehension of my meaning indicated by the remarks referred to, were the very natural result of a brief and broken conversation, carried on in the midst of the high excitement and confusion that then prevailed in the House.

"Let me add another word. While I have never felt or expressed a wish to be elevated to the responsible and distinguished office of presiding over the deliberations of the Representatives of the people, grateful as such promotion must be to the just and honorable pride of any man, I should scorn to seek it through any misconceptions which I may myself have occasioned, or have it in my power to remove.

"If placed in that elevated position by the action of this House, it must be with full knowledge of the fact that I maintain the conservative and national principles of that great party whose leader was the sage of Ashland, our pride and our boast; and I shall assume the chair untrammelled and unpledged, save by a sincere and sacred regard for the Constitution of my country, and for the just rights secured by it to each and every part of our Confederacy."

When, however, the Globe made its appearance, and I read the corrected and authentic record, which was to go out to the country, differing as it does from the previous reports which I had seen, and when the honorable member from Arkansas (Mr. HINDMAN) very promptly, and in a few words, corrected the published remarks which had fallen from him in the heated contest of Friday, thereby exonerating me from the charge of an indiscriminate denunciation and repudiation of the American party and its principles, I deemed no further explanation required from me, and that no just ground had been left for improper and injurious charges affecting myself.

In this connection I desire to call the attention of the House to the remarks of the honorable member from Pennsylvania, (Mr. MONTGOMERY,) followed by those of the honorable gentleman from Ohio, (Mr. PENDLETON.) On that occasion the following language was used by them:

"Mr. MONTGOMERY. And now, I desire to say a word in relation to the position of the gentleman presented as a candidate for the Speakership of this body. Mr. SMITH, of North Carolina, belongs to none of the organized parties in this House. He belongs to the remnant left of that glorious old party, at the head of which stood in years gone by a Clay and a Webster; he is an old-line Whig, who remains true to the principles and policy of that ancient and honorable party, and as such I can vote for him. If he were an American, or if he advocated their principles, I could not and would not vote for him. I have said in this House, heretofore, and I repeat it now, that I never have cast, and never will cast a vote for any one who holds that it is a cause for proscription that a man was born where God made him, or that to worship God according to the dictates of a man's conscience is a crime or a disgrace. I despise such narrow-hearted policy, and detest such bigotry and proscription.

"But, sir, I have said that Mr. SMITH does not belong to the American organization, and never did. He is a patriotic Whig, a friend of protection to American industry, a national man, a conservative man, a supporter of the Constitution, a friend of the Union, and as such I can give him my support. Trammelled by none of the embarrassing questions of the past, with no objectionable record, a gentleman of rare intelligence and high social virtues, he will adorn the Speaker's chair and preside over our deliberations with fairness and impar-

tiality. He remains a way-mark of the great party that has passed away—almost a last survivor of a race of giants. In a time like this, when no party has a majority, when no one organization can control an election, it is peculiarly fit to select one who, differing with us all, owes favoritism to none. Some of my northern Democratic friends have said that they would unite upon him when their friends come to the rescue. I am not going to say that; I am willing to give no such excuse; I will not be a stumbling-block to others. I act independently, and from pure motives, and I take the responsibility. I intend to change my vote, and others can do as they please. For these reasons, and prompted by the motives I have hastily expressed, I now change my vote from Mr. DAVIS to Mr. SMITH, of North Carolina. (Applause.)”

“MR. PENDLETON. Mr. Clerk, I represent on this floor a constituency which is composed of native-born and foreign-born citizens. Among them are a large number of Germans and Irish, of both religions, Catholic and Protestant. They are as honorable, as patriotic, as faithful to the Constitution of their adopted country as any of those who were born upon the soil. I owe much to their confidence and support heretofore. I would not violate my own convictions of duty by voting for any man whose political principles tend to degrade or injure them—whose sympathies are opposed to them. But I have made inquiries of the gentleman who is presented here as a candidate to-day. I have gone to the fountain-head for information, and I have learned that he never was a member of the Know Nothing party; that he has never taken any pledges; and that he does not sympathize with any of their proscriptive principles or doctrines. Sir, I would not yield any essential principle; but I would yield much of partisan feeling and prejudice, to effect an organization of this House. And the difficulty with me having now been removed, I am willing to unite with the conservative elements here for that purpose.

“I have voted for Mr. JOHN G. DAVIS. I desire to change that vote, and to vote for Mr. SMITH, of North Carolina. (Applause.)”

I wish, also, to read those made by the honorable member from Ohio, (Mr. COX,) who, as he states, spoke only upon information derived from his colleague:

“MR. COX. It is well known that I stated to this House that I never could vote for any gentleman of the Know Nothing organization. I said I never would vote for either a Republican or Know Nothing. *I never will.* I have satisfied myself beyond any possibility of mistake, that the gentleman from North Carolina (Mr. SMITH) is opposed to the proscriptive doctrines of the Know Nothing organization. I saw my colleague (Mr. PENDLETON) in conversation with that gentleman, and I inquired of him what that conversation was. He satisfied me, as Mr. SMITH satisfied him, that Mr. SMITH is not and never had been a member of the Know Nothing order, or in any way connected with it. As I make this remark, the gentleman from Kentucky, (Mr. MALLORY,) belonging to the American party, bows assent to it.

“On the other hand, I find that gentlemen on the Republican side, who, in the first instance, voted for Mr. SMITH, now, on learning the fact that he is not a Know Nothing, have made that a pretext for withdrawing their votes from him. They have done this for the openly avowed reason that he is an old-line conservative Whig, without any Know Nothing taint.

“Under these circumstances, I shall vote for Mr. SMITH; and for the additional reason that it will bring about, as I believe, and as I am informed by the condition of the ballot now, an organization of this House. In no other contingency would I give my vote to a gentleman not belonging to my own party. I believe in doing this that I am doing justice to the national men who sent me here, and to the oath I expect to take to support the Constitution. As a member of this coördinate branch of the Government, upon which the Constitution itself reposes for its execution, and which is utterly disorganized, I believe that I will do my highest duty, if, by my vote, I can bring about its organization by the election of an old-line Whig, who, here in my presence, as I now look at him, disavows the Know Nothing organization. With this view, I am acting, as I understand, with nearly every Democratic gentleman from the West. I agree

with almost every Democrat on the floor. I ask the privilege of changing my vote from Mr. BOCOCK, for whom I have voted persistently all along, to WILLIAM N. H. SMITH, of North Carolina. (Applause from the Democratic side and from the galleries.)

"The position of the Northwestern Democrats is well known. We went into a caucus of the Democratic party resolved to stand by its organization and its nominee to the end. We voted all the time for Mr. BOCOCK, until his name was withdrawn in a speech which he made here. We supported Mr. JOHN G. DAVIS, of the Northwest, who, was, perhaps, in closer relationship to us than even the gentleman from Virginia. We have voted also for the distinguished gentleman from Virginia, (Mr. MILLSON.) We have been all over the House to get a true, conservative man; notwithstanding he may have differed from us in some particulars of his politics. After seven weeks of exhausting labor, of constant vigilance, of pressing emergency in the country, we have come together now, at this juncture, and reached that point when the election of a Speaker is possible. And I could not answer to my constituents, I could not answer to that sense of duty from which I always act, unless I came up here now and contributed my part to an organization based upon national conservative principles.

"I am aware, sir, that it has been said here by gentlemen that southern men have not the same opinions on the subject of slavery that northern and northwestern Democrats have. I learn, however, that the gentleman who ran against and was beaten by Mr. SMITH, of North Carolina, uttered sentiments in favor of a slave code, which have no more affiliation with my views upon that subject than the views of some of the gentlemen for whom Democrats have voted. I have been reluctant to go South to vote for any man who belonged to the Know Nothing organization. That was well known. It was known that no such man could be elected. Hence, Mr. SMITH is presented, because he is not such a man. I will vote for him, because he is imbued with national and Union sentiments; so that, when he takes that chair, he will do his whole duty to the country. I come from a State which, although Republican, as represented on this floor, has in its heart—at its capital district, which I represent—a true Union feeling that the men of that State will not willingly let die. I pay homage to that feeling in my present vote.

"Mr. HILL. I wish to ask the gentleman whether, in his present action, he is influenced by recent occurrences here—the withdrawal of certain votes from Mr. SMITH on the other side of the House, I believe because he is not an American? I have not known myself that the American party or the Whig party were particularly in the keeping of that side of the House at this time. I merely direct the gentleman's attention to the matter to know if that circumstance has in any degree influenced his vote.

"Mr. COX. From what transpired on the Republican side of the House, I saw gentlemen who voted for Mr. SMITH, of North Carolina, withdraw their votes, putting it upon the direct and express ground that he was not a Know Nothing. That they withdrew their votes, whether in good faith or not, I regarded as confirmatory of the truth stated by the gentleman from North Carolina himself, that he had no connection whatever with that order. Gentlemen on the other side have declared that Mr. SMITH was not acceptable to them because he was not an American. I say that he is acceptable to the national men upon this side of the House because he is a member of the old Whig party. That party, as I learn from their platform, ever stood side by side with the Democratic party upon the great question connected with the slavery agitation. They stood upon the compromises of 1850; compromises sustained by the Democratic party; compromises, sir, which, if carried out in the spirit in which they were enacted, would bring about that concord and comity between the States which is so much desired in the present distraction of our public councils."

I will also read those made by the honorable member from Arkansas, (Mr. HINDMAN,) and his correction on Monday:

"Mr. Clerk, at every ballot during this contest I have voted for a Democrat. I have thought all along, and still believe, that the southern Opposition ought

to have brought their twenty-three votes to a man of our choice, a Democrat, instead of asking us to carry our ninety-odd votes to a man of their choice—one of themselves. It has been unreasonable for them—a small faction, not controlling a single State in the Union—to demand such a concession of a great national party, composed, as ours is, of Representatives from every section.

"But there seems to be a disposition among Democrats to make the sacrifice. It is believed that votes enough can be concentrated on the gentleman from North Carolina (Mr. SMITH) to elect him Speaker, and to end this protracted struggle. Those good and true men, the Democrats of the North, who have made so many proofs of devotion to the Constitution, indicate their willingness to give this further evidence of patriotism. I understand that most of them, if not all, will vote for Mr. SMITH, when it appears that their support will secure his election. But they cannot be expected to do this until the entire South shall have united upon him. Under these circumstances, I am not disposed to be an obstacle in the way of organization. I have heretofore said that I would, in the last resort, vote for a southern Opponent, in order to defeat the Black Republican candidate; and I am now ready to take the responsibility by changing my vote from Mr. BOGOCOCK to Mr. SMITH.

"But, before making the change, I state distinctly, that I vote for Mr. SMITH with the express understanding that he has never belonged to or affiliated with the Know Nothing party, directly or indirectly; and that he has always condemned and repudiated its doctrines. I vote for him with the understanding that he is an old-line Whig. In voting for him as such, I have no eulogy to pass on Whigery, and no indorsement to give to it. I have never done that; and shall not be so inconsistent as to do so now. But Whigery, as much as I condemn it, is far less objectionable than Black Republicanism. Between too evils, I shall choose the least. I vote for Mr. SMITH."

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On the Monday following he made the explanatory remarks:

"Mr. HINDMAN (when his name was called) said: I see by the report in the Globe of Friday's proceedings that I am represented as saying:

"I vote for Mr. SMITH with the express understanding that he has never belonged to or affiliated with the Know Nothing party, directly or indirectly; and that he has always condemned and repudiated its doctrines."

"I should have said that I was informed that Mr. SMITH did not sympathize with the proscriptive doctrines of that party."

It will thus be seen, that I am represented as saying that I have always been, and am still, a Whig; that I have never been a member of the American organization; and that I did not concur in or sympathize with any proscriptive features of its party creed.

This is strictly correct. Some of the measures of the American party, as I freely stated to my friend, did command my approval; but there was nothing proscriptive in them. I could not commit the wrong of denouncing men to whose patriotic and earnest efforts I owed, in no inconsiderable degree, the honor of being a member of this body. I regretted very much the harsh language which was used by some on that occasion, when speaking of the American party. I attributed it mostly to the peculiar circumstances in which gentlemen were placed, and as a necessary self-protection against unfounded charges at home. It was painful, nevertheless, to listen to language which fell so harshly upon the ears, not

only of my friends at home, but of that portion of this House constituting the southern Opposition, who so manfully, in spite of all, stood by me to the end.

Still, the statements to which I have called the attention of this House are strictly correct. I have nothing to add to them; nothing to subtract from them. It is true, I am a Whig. I stand where, for more than twenty-five years, I have stood, without faltering, amid the mutations of party names and party organizations; looking upon the great interests of the country as illuminated in the light shed upon them by the master spirits of the generation of statesmen that is past, and clinging, with filial devotion, to that noble standard which so long waved over the gallant, patriotic Whigs of the school of Henry Clay.

In that great party there was, there could be, no sectionalism. It had no double readings to its political creed. It was eminently a national party, knowing no North, South, East, or West, but coextensive with the length and breadth of the Confederacy. With the alleged disintegration of its organized existence, the principles committed to its keeping have not perished. They still live, and are cherished in the affections of the great mass of our people. The American heart yet throbs with deeper energy of pulsation, when that name is pronounced which so often led its embattled hosts to action. The eminent nationality of purpose and principle which the favorite son of Kentucky breathed into that party, giving to it its vital energy, is still looked to to guide us safely through surrounding perils.

I have an abiding faith in the permanency of free institutions—in the continuance of our nationality. I hope to see the ultimate triumph of the conservative sentiment which found its just expression in Henry Clay, and in his public life.

I hope to see that vast sectional organization, held together by the single cohesion of hostility to the institutions of nearly one half of our confederated States, now brooding over the almost entire North, and smothering the generous and patriotic aspirations that struggle to break from the pressure; an organization which, in producing a natural and necessary antagonism in the South, has almost rent us in twain, and arrayed section against section in fierce conflict, threatening, in its further aggressive progress, the overthrow of our political institutions—I hope to see this organization, in all its pride of strength, crumbling and wasting before the consuming fires of popular wrath, as winter snows dissolve and disappear under the returning heat of spring. I hope to witness the union of true and just men everywhere in resolute resistance to the sectional spirit which animates and directs its movements.

When, laying aside the bitter party feuds and fierce con-

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tentions which now mo- divide a
people, one in the glori- and one, it
should be, in its high ir- the future,
the popular mind shall to the basis of compromise
which men of all parties assisted in forming in 1850; which
both national conventions of 1852 approved, and adopted as
the ground of a lasting settlement; which constitutes the
crowning glory of that pure, just, and honorable administra-
tion, which, in the midst of a profound peace, closed with the
retirement of Millard Fillmore from the public service; when,
again, the conservative elements, attracted by a true devotion
and love of country, shall return to this compromise, then, sir,
may we hope for a restoration of that harmony and good will
which were its first beneficent fruits; then will pass away
the dark clouds gathering upon our horizon, and portentous
of disaster and danger; then may our proud old ship, which
has buffeted the surges of many storms, and yet rejoices in
her compact, unbroken strength and beauty, leave the moor-
ings to which the outer tempest had driven her for shelter
from its violence, and spread her sails to favoring breezes as
she starts upon her voyage over the wide ocean of national
life.